

## Shaping Tastes: Authority Versus Democracy and Professionals Versus Amateurs

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**ABSTRACT:** In the ‘age of authority’, the dominant voice in restaurant criticism was the connoisseur, the recognised expert authority with the knowledge and experience to make judgements. These traditional restaurant critics published reviews on a regular basis in mainstream newspapers and magazines. The era of the connoisseurial critic as the sole arbiter of taste came to an end with the advent of user-generated content distributed over the World Wide Web, heralding the ‘age of democracy’. The explosion of blogs, interactive websites and more recently social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter has brought about dramatic changes in the way information is generated and shared, not least in the way people can access information about restaurants. The ability to self-generate content means that diners can now publish their own reviews of their dining experiences, and social media platforms allow producers, chefs and restaurateurs, and mainstream critics to communicate directly with consumers. However, reports of the death of the traditional, professional critic have been greatly exaggerated. This paper begins with an overview of criticism in the ‘age of authority’ and the current situation in the ‘age of democracy’. It then explores the pros and cons of this new age and who holds the balance of power in shaping our ideas of what is and is not legitimate taste.

Traditionally restaurant critics are professional journalists. They write what Blank (2007) classifies as connoisseurial reviews. That is reviews that rely on the opinions and discernment of an individual, a connoisseur, who is deemed to be an expert in their field. The connoisseur is someone with the skills (the experience and specialised knowledge) to evaluate, to make judgements on quality and to rank cultural objects. Connoisseurial reviews are almost always entirely text, and assume an audience interested in the subject, with the facility to read a complex, discursive narrative, and the time to devote to serious reading. Like critics in the arts, restaurant critics also provide basic information and act as educators, alerting readers to what to expect and how to behave. In the early days of mainstream restaurant criticism, critics and restaurant guides also acted as consumer advocates. The British *Good Food Guide* (first published in 1951) for example was established with the explicit aim of raising the standard of British restaurant food and was compiled from recommendations made by people who cared about good food (Driver 1983).

Before digital media the main way that consumers learnt about restaurants was through newspaper and

magazine reports. Critics acted as gatekeepers by determining what was worthy of bringing to the attention of would-be diners. Readers understood that for a review to be included in a publication, be it a newspaper, magazine or restaurant guide, the restaurant was at least deserving of consideration. In the age of authority most restaurants never received the attention of critics, and restaurants that were not reviewed to all intents and purposes did not exist.

The role I wish to discuss here is the critic as a tastemaker. Lane (2013, p. 343) defines taste makers as

highly influential individuals or social groups who, by laying down the rules of what constitutes good or legitimate taste, may strongly influence aesthetic and economic identifications and practices among consumers and producers of cultural products.

Lane further asserts that

Taste makers[,] by imposing a canon of rules and standards, establish an aesthetic trend and determine what is legitimate taste. Arbiters of taste may have far-reaching symbolic effects and material consequences for the whole cultural field.

Taste makers then by definition have good taste, the ability to judge what is appropriate, and are able to draw distinctions based on standards. In their role as taste makers, critics act as cultural intermediaries in that they ‘construct value, by framing how others (end consumers, as well as other market actors including other cultural intermediaries) engage with goods, affecting and effecting others’ orientations towards these goods as legitimate’ (Maguire and Matthews 2012, pp.551-2).

The success and influence of connoisseurial reviews is dependent on a number of factors (Blank 2007, p. 149). Most significant is the consistency of the reviewer and the relationship that they establish with their readership. Over time readers come to know and trust the opinions of critics who apply consistent standards and establish themselves as reliable, independent sources of information. Readers can measure their own experiences against the recommendations of the critic and learn to make allowances for his or her personal idiosyncrasies. The power of an individual critic is dependent on the production of credible knowledge, their independence from chefs and restaurateurs, and their adherence to ethical standards (Blank 2007, pp. 50-54). Much of the respect owed to individual critics also derives from the publication for which they write. The reputation of *The New York Times* for example lends credibility, and significant influence, to

the reviews published there (Davis 2009; Blank 2007; Dornenburg and Page 1998). Barrows et al (1989) go so far as to suggest that where the review is printed may be more important to readers than who actually wrote it. The 'age of dictatorship authority' then was dominated by connoisseurial critics who had established themselves as trustworthy authority figures. They attracted attention not just because of the credibility of the newspapers for which they wrote but also based on their recognised status as objective, discerning judges coupled with an ability to craft entertaining and informative prose.

The review process itself passes judgement on the particular dining experience but many critics also use some form of rating system. Stars or a numerical score, can either provide an overall evaluation or rate aspects of the experience (such as food and service), and confirm the role of the critic as a tastemaker by establishing a status hierarchy. The best-known grading system is that used by the *Michelin Guide* which introduced as early as 1926 a rating of from one to three stars for the restaurants it listed. Originally dealing only with restaurants in France, the *Michelin Guide* has been expanded to include editions for many European countries, Japan, and major cities in the Asia-Pacific region and North and South America (Michelin Guide 2017). Michelin's standards of professionalism, its emphasis on the anonymity of its inspectors, independence from the restaurant industry and overall objectivity have contributed to the *Michelin Guide's* reputation and made the attainment of three Michelin stars an internationally recognised mark of excellence.

As Blank (2007, p. 161) explains, the logic behind the rating of restaurants in this way requires that it is difficult to achieve even the lowest ranking. Few restaurants will rate at all and fewer still will achieve the highest rating. Publications like *The New York Times* and the *Michelin Guide* only award stars to a limited number of top rated experiences against which other experiences are measured, thus establishing a hierarchy of cultural value. Many reviewers and restaurant guides, which aggregate lists of restaurants based on a geographic area from individual cities and towns to whole countries, adopt similar principles in that only restaurants achieving a minimum score are listed, with only a handful awarded the highest status. The restaurants that connoisseurs review, and those which find themselves in the *Michelin Guide*, serve food that in some way calls attention to itself, and are felt to be 'important' (Blank 2007, p. 48). These reviews tend to focus on more expensive, high-end and 'fine-dining' establishments serving high quality, creative cuisine. The traditional connoisseurial system is selective and fundamentally elitist.

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### The coming of the amateur critic

The role of the professional commentator on restaurants has changed little since the days of Grimod de la Reynière,

popularly regarded as the first restaurant critic, who began publishing his *Almanach des Gourmands* in 1803. The biggest threat to the authority of the professional critic came with the developments which allowed for the linking of shared information on the World Wide Web, leading to increased access to information and the ability of users to generate their own content. The various content sharing and social media sites we are now so familiar with have been available for little more than twenty years. The first web diaries began in 1994 with the term 'blog' coined in 1997. Blog-hosting services such as Blogger (introduced 1999) and Wordpress (introduced 2003) made it possible for anyone with a computer and some spare time to write about whatever took their fancy, and many chose to write about food (Walker Rettburg 2008). Individuals writing about their dining experiences represented the first significant challenge to the power of the professional journalist.

Few blogs reached a wide audience (Watson *et al.* 2008) although with time some bloggers have become either professional or semi-professional themselves. Endorsement by the mainstream, be it other critics or other media, has helped to establish them as authority figures in their own right (Vincent 2014a; Vincent 2014b). The first enthusiasm to write blogs and emulate the professional critic has waned amid predictions that blogging itself is dying out (Drum 2015; Kopytoff 2011). Subsequently other avenues for sharing dining experiences such as Facebook from 2004, YouTube from 2005, Twitter from 2006 and Instagram from 2010, offering an immediacy which blogs lack, expanded the way diners can communicate their thoughts about what they are eating and where they are eating it.

Concurrently crowd sourced sites, like TripAdvisor from 2000, Yelp from 2004, Urbanspoon from 2006 and Zomato from 2008, which provide basic, factual information about the restaurants listed, along with reviews and customer ratings, have gained a significant audience. These sites have come in for their share of approbation. However, the validity of ratings is questioned because the contributors are faceless, their credentials are unknown, the reviews they provide are often too short to be meaningful, and the comments are highly personal and often contradictory (for example Ruby 2010). There is also ample evidence of fraud and manipulation (Butler 2017; Chamlee 2016; Luca and Zervas 2015). The Internet serves opinion, subjective responses based on feelings and impressions, rather than true criticism, based on knowledge and experience, and ideally involving some form of analysis. Nonetheless the figures for the use and coverage of these sites are astonishing. Luca (2011) found that in 2009 Yelp listed reviews for 60,000 eating places in Seattle, which covered around 70 percent of all the operational restaurants in that city. *The Seattle Times* meanwhile had reviewed only about 5 percent of the restaurants in operation between 2003 and 2009 (Luca 2011, p. 3). According to the latest figures provided by Yelp, 17 per cent of the reviews of businesses published on the

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site cover restaurants. Yelp averages 74 million unique visitors per month who access the site via mobile web, 30 million who use the app and 84 million unique visitors using desktop computers (Yelp 2017). Recent research also confirms that by far the most common search on review sites is for local restaurants and cafes (Brightlocal 2017; National Restaurant Association 2013).

Yelp, Zomato and the like are of course neither the first nor the only user-generated restaurant guides. The British *Good Food Guide* has been giving voice to consumers since 1951 and was unique in being published, from 1963 until 2013, under the auspices of the United Kingdom Consumers Association. The *Zagat Survey*, the brainchild of Tim and Nina Zagat, began in New York in 1979 and ultimately covered major cities in the US and one hundred other countries (Davis 2009; Shaw 2000). Today both the British *Good Food Guide* (now owned by Waitrose) and the *Zagat Survey* (now owned by Google) have an online presence, and the former offers paid access to a digital version of the guide.

At the beginning of 2018, mainstream restaurant criticism, via newspapers, magazines and restaurant guides, co-exists with the chatter about restaurants generated online. Despite the suggestion that mainstream criticism is in its death throes (Martin 2011; Ozersky 2010) voices of authority still reign at influential publications like *The New York Times*. Print media have risen to the challenge and authoritative newspapers and magazines are also accessible on-line, in some cases freely available, in others via subscription. And rather than fading away the *Michelin Guide* is also now available online. In addition, Michelin has been joined by The World's 50 Best Restaurants ranking, and even more recently by La Liste, as arbiters of international standards. Meanwhile, according to recent research, 40 percent of diners check online reviews before visiting a restaurant for the first time (Hesseltine 2015) and 60 per cent of consumers polled in 2017 had read an online review for a restaurant or café (Brightlocal 2017).

### The balance of power in 'the age of democracy'

In 'the age of democracy' online review sites, be they blogs or those that aggregate user-generated ratings, cover a significantly larger number and a greater variety of restaurants than was ever possible with traditional media. Critics writing in newspapers and magazines are constrained by budgets and column inches and are therefore highly selective, only reviewing those places deemed worthy of their, and their readers', attention. Online sites can include reviews of both the best and the worst, from the nearest outpost of a well-known hamburger chain to restaurants awarded three stars by the *Michelin Guide*, and everything in between. Would-be diners can search for restaurants using a number of different criteria such as locality, price range, and type of cuisine, to find somewhere that meets their needs. Some

amateur reviewers visit the same places as professionals and couch their reviews in similar terms, but in general online reviewers play an important role by increasing the visibility of restaurants and bringing lesser-known, local restaurants to the attention of potential customers.

The age of democracy also provides for commentary from a more diverse population since the web is, at least in theory, open to all regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or class. In reality consumer-generated sites are not without some bias. The majority of reviews are provided by an active minority (Mellet *et al.* 2014). Earlier research indicated that newspaper reviews were most often read by people who dined out frequently and were an important source of information for those who spent large amounts of money at restaurants (Blank 2007 pp. 64-66; Barrows *et al.* 1989). Recent surveys of the users of online reviews suggest that opinions about eating out are still the preserve of the better educated and affluent. The higher the income, and the greater the number of years of education, the more likely people are to both to share their experiences on Yelp and to use Yelp to learn about new restaurants (Yelp 2017a; Hesseltine 2015; Parikh 2014).

Sites like Yelp and Zomato are not blind to the idea that some opinions are potentially more valuable than others. Most online review sites single out those who make the greatest contribution and whose reviews are considered to be the most informative. 'Yelpers' can become part of an 'elite' group, earning kudos for well-written reviews, high quality tips, a detailed personal profile and active voting and complementing (Patterson 2017; Yelp 2017b). Zomato 'verifies' the accounts of those contributors deemed to write informative, unbiased and useful reviews which help the foodie community (Zomato 2017). Rewarding contributors encourages them to go on participating, and also helps to establish authoritative voices which in turn enhance the credibility of the site itself. Yelp and Zomato recognise that readers have more confidence in an 'expert'.

Star ratings and numerical grades have always acted as a shorthand means by which consumers could form judgements without having to read lengthy explanations of the reasons for awarding the score. The *Michelin Guide* in particular provides very little justification for the stars it awards. The value of these stars is determined by the credibility of the publication. The lack of stable criteria and the sheer number of diverse opinions would appear to mitigate against the integrity of scores awarded by online sites. The scores on Yelp are based on the aggregate of a number of individual experiences but not on those experiences relative to other dining experiences. The assumption is that all dining experiences are legitimate, and all 4.5-star experiences are equally valid. Publications like *The New York Times* and the *Michelin Guide* only award stars to a limited number of top rated experiences against which other experiences are measured, thus establishing a hierarchy of cultural value (Blank 2007, p. 161). However, as Luca demonstrates, consumer response



to a restaurant's average rating on online review sites is affected both by the number of reviews and whether the reviewers are certified as 'elite'. Reviews written by 'elite' members have more than twice the impact of other reviews (Luca 2011). The 'age of authority' is by no means dead.

However, consumers are not swayed by ratings alone. Reviews are not the only source of information which consumers consult. Jolson and Bushman (1978) found that recommendations from friends were the most reliable source for suggestions about where to eat for the first time (see also Lane 2014, p. 271). Other potential sources of influence include advertising, the restaurant's reputation, their menu offerings and the price of dishes. Mundane considerations such as locality, accessibility and the number of people dining also play a key role in decisions about where to dine. Today, consumers can easily access objective information to help in their decision-making. In the age of democracy most restaurants make the details of their menu and its price structure directly available via their website, along with other practical information such as contact details, hours of opening, seating and booking arrangements, and maps showing precise location. Some restaurant websites also publish reviews from authoritative newspapers and ratings that they have received from both online and printed restaurant guides.

In 2018 the audience for restaurant reviews are better informed than ever before and are capable of gleaning the most useful information from any available source. The recent Brightlocal (2017) study of consumers in the United States found that, while 85 per cent of the respondents trusted online reviews as much as personal recommendations, the average consumer wanted a business to have 34 reviews before trusting the accuracy of the rating and 68 per cent read four or more reviews before trusting a business. Just as readers form judgements about professional critics based on their own experience, they are also discriminating when it comes to online reviews. Mellet *et al.* (2014, p. 21) suggest that, in fact, the ability to browse the highly subjective opinions on user-generated sites guarantees the formation of an objective judgement. Reviews, whatever their source, are read and interpreted in the context of individual needs, previous experience and personal prejudices (Blank 2007, pp. 29-30, 137).

Although decision-making may be the primary motivation for reading traditional connoisseurial reviews (Jolson and Bushman 1978), the general public interested in dining out and in the restaurant scene read this style of review for a variety of reasons. Nor is the sole purpose of the review to influence readers' decisions and persuade them to dine at the restaurant under discussion. Critics working for print media are employed to sell newspapers and magazines, not restaurants (Heilpern 2016; Ah-Kin 2013; Rayner 2007). Many people read restaurant criticism to educate themselves about new trends and styles, and methods of cooking. Some are more interested in following chefs they are familiar with and learning about new faces

or simply keeping up to date with changes in restaurant culture. Connoisseurial reviews may be read for any number of reasons which may never translate into readers actually eating at any of the restaurants that they have learnt about (Blank 2007, pp. 157-6). Written to both inform and entertain, good criticism can also be read simply for the pleasure of reading quality writing. While Parikh *et al.* (2014) concluded that people read Yelp reviews for a number of reasons these were all associated with choosing somewhere to dine. The majority of people who post reviews on-line do so as a service to inform other customers and to help other consumers make decisions (Podium 2017; Parikh *et al.* 2014). These observations coupled with the brevity of many consumer-generated reviews and the consequent lack of any informed discussion suggests that those who use Yelp and similar sites do not read the reviews posted there for entertainment or to educate themselves. In 'the age of democracy' there remains room for writing about restaurants which both informs and engages. Amateur reviews compliment rather than substitute for traditional criticism (Verboord 2010).

There can be little argument that the flow of information between producers, consumers and critics in the restaurant field has improved in 'the age of democracy'. Using traditional media, readers built a relationship with a professional critic over time, by regularly reading their reviews and comparing experiences (Blank 2007, pp. 134-135). Today it is possible for critics and their audience to have a more immediate and personal connection. Social media allows critics to express their personality, enhance their authority and engage with a broader range of issues, not just with the public, but also with chefs, restaurateurs and other critics. However, the same media that allows critics direct access to diners also allows chefs and restaurateurs to communicate directly with their customer base. Chefs also have the opportunity to promote themselves both personally and professionally. They can respond directly to comments made on Yelp and Zomato and make use of these platforms and the data they make available to conduct valuable market research (Studeman 2017). It is this ability of producers to negotiate directly with consumers that calls into question the importance of the professional critic as a cultural intermediary.

While chefs and restaurateurs are urged to engage with their customers and embrace the opportunities provided by an online presence (National Restaurant Association 2013), the relationship between chefs and amateur critics is often fraught (for example Hills 2012; Rousseau 2012, pp. ix-x, 61). As Jurafsky *et al.* (2014) demonstrate, most online reviewers are principally concerned with conveying a positive portrait of themselves. Their negative reviews tend to focus on what Jurafsky *et al.* call 'service-related trauma' rather than discussing food, while reviews of expensive restaurants aim to portray the writer as an educated, food-loving sensualist, in possession of superior cultural capital. Exchanges between chefs / restaurateurs and the

writers of negative reviews suggest that criticism is only welcome from sources that are considered to be informed and objective. Both Lane (2014) and Rao *et al.* (2003) confirm that chefs are more responsive to their peers than they are to outsiders. Some outsiders however do have credibility. In the words of New York restaurateur Eddie Huang (2012), '[i]n a world ... where people think yelp has credence, LUCKILY, we have the NY Times. Thank fucking god for the New York Times because you can trust them' (see also Davis 2009, pp. 231-233). Serious chefs respect serious, intelligent reviews that they can learn from (Dornenburg and Page 1998, p. 134). Chefs may be critical of the *Michelin Guide*, but they do acknowledge the benefit of star ratings to promoting their restaurant, and the personal satisfaction that comes with this affirmation (Lane 2014, p. 121; Rao *et al.* 2003; Rao *et al.* 2005).

Critics are part of the process of giving symbolic meaning to goods and services. Their role is to explain the value of new commodities – not just what they are but why we should want to engage with them. The role of the critic as a tastemaker – someone who influences what will become fashionable – is most powerful in a dynamic system, where there is innovation and change, where shifting boundaries require an assessment of what is new and whether it is acceptable. Mendelshon (2012) describes the critic as someone who 'hungers to make sense of that new thing, to analyse it, interpret it, make it *mean* something'. But critics can only comment on and rank what is available: they do not initiate trends (Lane, 2014, p. 308). It is chefs and restaurateurs who create the dynamic system by challenging the status quo. Ultimately the power to change what we eat lies with 'activists in the kitchen' (Rao *et al.* 2003, p.816). It is the role of critics to identify these culinary activists. In their study of the *nouvelle cuisine* movement in France, Rao *et al.* (2003) argue that it was the status of chefs, gained through their legitimization by respected critics, that gave them the confidence to continue to experiment and encouraged others to follow suit. Chefs and restaurateurs are not 'subservient to critics', it is the activists in the kitchen who 'redefine the boundaries for the critics to recognise' (Rao *et al.* 2005, p. 989). Rao *et al.* (2005, p.989) describe critics as 'midwives of boundary change, rather than zealous guardians'. As a three-star chef explained to Lane (2014, p. 278) '[f]irst the chef has to bring the achievement but then he has to be made known'. Critical discussion and evaluation communicates new ideas and encourages shared understandings between chef and consumers.

A reading of online reviews makes it clear that these diners do not decide to eat at Eleven Madison Park in New York because Kevin M. of Dingle rates it as five stars on Zomato. Online commentators invariably reference the rating given by sources such as *The New York Times* and *Michelin*, and their own reviews are shaped by those of professional critics. They choose to dine at Eleven Madison Park because it has been rated by respected authorities as

the best. Similarly, the owners of Eleven Madison Park do not promote their restaurant as earning 4.5 stars on Yelp. Rather the restaurant's website emphasises its rating as number one in the world according to The World's 50 Best Restaurants, its four stars from the critic at *The New York Times* and its three-star rating in the *Michelin Guide* (Eleven Madison Park, 2017). While consumer-generated reviews can be posted daily, Eleven Madison Park has only been reviewed in *The New York Times* twice since the present chef, Daniel Humm, took over in 2006 (Wells 2015; Bruni 2009). The opinions of Bruni and Wells, and the anonymous inspectors, chefs, restaurateurs, food writers and well-travelled gourmets who decide the ratings for *Michelin* and The World's 50 Best Restaurants trump the 1705 reviews published on Yelp, with both consumers and producers.

## Conclusion

In the age of democracy, the professional connoisseur is aided and abetted by the amateur gourmet with a smartphone. I have suggested elsewhere that the popularity of modernist cuisine owes a debt to the growth of social media (Vincent 2014a). While traditional critics brought the dishes of chefs such as Ferran Adrià and Rene Redzepi to public attention and were able to analyse and interpret them, they nonetheless struggled to describe the unusual ingredients, challenging combinations of flavours and unconventional methods of presenting and serving the food. Meanwhile amateur critics, persuaded to engage with these chefs because of the critical praise they attracted, were recounting their own experiences and uploading pictures and videos which showed exactly what to expect in a top-rated modernist restaurant, to satisfy the curiosity of the many who would never dine at one.

The real power wielded by professional critics is not the influence they have on consumers' dining choices but their influence as taste makers. Since Grimod, restaurant critics have performed a democratising function, circulating information about elite standards to a wide audience (Mennell 1996, p. 266) while simultaneously setting the benchmark for what constitutes good taste. In essence while much has changed in the age of democracy, much remains the same. The opinions posted on-line by amateur reviewers only serve to confirm what producers, critics and consumers have always known - people dine out for a variety of reasons and their choices are idiosyncratic. Grimod de la Reynière recognised that the best places to eat were those 'where fashion, location, décor, service, price, popularity and happiness all find the best conjunction' (Appelbaum 2011, p. 67). Although Grimod acknowledged that the true gourmand recognises what is appropriate to their needs, that someone with good taste appreciates any well-prepared dish regardless of how splendid or undistinguished its origin (Spang 2002, p. 158), he also introduced the concept of the connoisseur who legitimates the work of culinary artists.

The power of professional critics lies in their ability to disseminate knowledge, to encourage chefs and foster competition between them, and to shape a shared symbolic environment for producers and consumers. Reviews available online broaden and promote interest in restaurant dining in general, and add to a vibrant critical atmosphere, but the power to legitimate tastes still rests with the connoisseurial critic.

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